DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 569 FL 023 931

AUTHOR Blue, George M.
TITLE Self-Assessment of Foreign Language Skills: Does It Work?
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 20p.; For complete volume, see FL 023 929.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT CLE Working Papers; n3 p18-35 1994

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *English for Academic Purposes; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; Questionnaires; *Second Language Learning; Self Concept; *Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Student Attitudes; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *University of Southampton (England)

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on university student self-assessment of foreign language program learning at the University of Southampton (England) in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms. A survey of foreign language students on progress in foreign language learning revealed that many students were not unduly influenced by their scores on internationally recognized language tests when they assessed their own language level. If the international test scores are an accurate reflection of linguistic ability, then it would seem that self-ratings of language ability at the beginning of the pre-sessional course cannot be relied upon. Nine questionnaires completed in post-course evaluations indicated that there was not a very good match between the teachers' assessments and the students' assessments at the end of the pre-sessional course and two terms later. It is concluded that self-assessment for students appears to involve great difficulty, even with teacher feedback. Yet, evidence was found to support the belief that students who do assess their language level realistically may persevere with language learning to a greater extent than those whose assessment is unrealistically high or low. Both performance and progress must be monitored by teachers, with constant feedback, for students to be able to realistically self-assess their progress in language learning. (Contains 15 references.) (Author/NAV)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 396 569

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS: DOES IT WORK?

George M Blue

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. J. Brumfit

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

FL 023931

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SELF-ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SKILLS: DOES IT WORK?

George M Blue

Introduction

Originally, interest in self-assessment developed out of a more general interest in the area of autonomous learning or learner independence. It has normally been seen as one of the more problematic aspects of self-directed language learning (Blue 1988). It is widely recognised that learners may find it difficult to be objective about their own language level, or that they may not have the necessary expertise and experience to make judgements of this sort. Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons why self-assessment should be encouraged. Dickinson (1987) gives three justifications for self-assessment, which show it to be an important part of learner autonomy. Firstly, learners will find that an ability to evaluate their language level will help them in the learning process. Secondly, it is one of the areas for which learners should learn to take some responsibility in the development of autonomy. Thirdly, it frees the teacher to help with other parts of the learning process.

Oskarsson (1989) talks of six different reasons why self-assessment procedures can be beneficial in language learning, namely promotion of learning, raised level of awareness, improved goal-orientation, expansion of range of assessment, shared assessment burden and beneficial post-course effects. These benefits could apply at least in part to traditional teaching patterns as well as to autonomous learning. Although there is still considerable interest in the role of self-assessment as one aspect of learner autonomy, it has increasingly come to be seen as having a part to play in more traditional patterns of teaching too.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that self-assessment (or perhaps more precisely, self-monitoring of performance) is coming to play quite an important role in British primary and secondary schools, where pupils may regularly be asked to comment on how well they have performed on a particular task, before the teacher adds his or her comments, often confirming the child's evaluation, although sometimes, of course, disagreeing or introducing factors that the child may not have thought of. The same happens at the end of the school year, when pupils are asked to comment on what they have achieved in each subject

during the year before the teacher adds his or her comments to the subject review. All this, I believe, stays on the child's file and, of course, in these days of universal charterage, a copy goes home to the parents.

One reason why self-evaluation has come to assume such importance in the educational field generally is that there is an increased desire for pupils to be self-critical in their work as they go along. Of course, it may be that evaluating the work they have done in all the National Curriculum subjects, plus a few more thrown in for good measure, can become rather tedious for pupils, though probably not as tedious as all the report writing and record keeping that teachers are now routinely involved in. One benefit of self-evaluation to pupils is that it may help them to assess the effort they are putting in, which may encourage them to try harder next time. It may also help them to begin to appreciate what they are capable of for themselves, building a positive self-image, and increasing their self-confidence. It may help them to realise that there is a distinction between competence and performance and to think consciously about their strengths and weaknesses, so that they know where to direct their efforts in future.

One thirteen-year old supplied the following spontaneous comments about self-assessment:

> you have to think of something to put;
>
> it's really hard;
>
> it's horrible to do;
>
> the teachers aren't happy if you just write one line.

These initial reactions then gave way to some more reflective comments:

> it's often a description of what you've done and whether you've enjoyed it rather than about how well you've done;
>
> once a year isn't enough.

In some ways these last comments were very perceptive. It is difficult to judge the quality of one's own performance, and it is certainly necessary to be assessing oneself regularly and probably in smaller chunks if the task is not to become too daunting or if progress is to be monitored in any meaningful way.

In the teaching of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), where attendance at classes is often purely voluntary, and where learners often have to cope with numerous demands upon their time and energy, many of the benefits mentioned above are likely to be particularly relevant, but there are a few more besides. EAP students can gain considerable benefit from developing their self-assessment skills, whether they are working in a self-instructional mode or attending classes, or a combination of these.

If we consider first of all initial self-assessment, the aim is primarily for students to measure their present level of competence in the different skills and perhaps to compare it with their target level. If their self-assessment is accurate it will help them to determine their priorities in language learning, an important step in the process of assuming responsibility for learning. It may also be useful for the purpose of placing students in classes.

Self-assessment is of course an on-going process, and the aim of self-assessment at an intermediate stage in a language learning programme is for students to think about their present level in relation to both their starting level and their target level. This may encourage learners as they think about the progress they have made, although it might also help them to realise that language learning is very time-consuming. It should help them to refine their objectives in the light of the progress they have made to date, since it is possibly not until this stage that realistic goals can be set, and it may help them to think about the efficiency of the learning process and to review their methodology. Monitoring of progress can thus both feed into and benefit from this kind of intermediate self-assessment.

Finally, self-assessment can also be useful at the end of a course of study. At this stage learners need to have a fairly clear idea of what they are capable of in the language and of their limitations. This can give them a more positive self-image and act as a boost to their confidence. However, few learners will ever be completely happy with their level of proficiency in a foreign language, and it can also be a time for planning future learning, which may take place in a less formal way but which nevertheless needs to be programmed into a busy schedule.

Some previous studies (e.g. LeBlanc 1985; Bachman and Palmer 1989) suggest that students are able to assess their linguistic ability fairly accurately, whereas others (e.g. Wangsotorn 1981; Blue 1988) conclude that many students find it very difficult to assess their current language ability. It is arguable that in a

traditional language teaching classroom where attendance at classes is obligatory, this may not matter unduly. However, attendance on many EAP courses is purely voluntary and students may cease to attend and cease to work at their English as soon as they think they have reached an adequate level. This is perhaps even more true of learners following a programme of self-instruction. In such cases self-assessment is an important preliminary step before learners analyse their language needs and set goals for their language learning. In the next section we shall look at how a group of learners actually perform these tasks.

A number of different possibilities for self-assessment are discussed by Oskarsson (1978). The self-assessment questionnaire in use at the University of Southampton builds on his descriptive rating scales, but it also owes a great deal to Ward Goodbody's (1993) work, where she asks students to give paragraph-long answers to a number of questions about their previous language learning experience and their expectations. These longer answers provide an opportunity for tutors to assess students' writing informally without the students feeling that they are being tested.

These self-assessment questionnaires are given to all students registering for EAP courses, both pre-sessional and in-sessional. For the pre-sessional course they serve to supplement the information gained from the placement test and the oral interview. For in-sessional courses students are placed in the appropriate classes on the basis of their self-assessment questionnaires and an interview. The interview explores some of the issues raised in the questionnaire, and students are encouraged to think more fully about their current language level, their language needs and the level they might realistically be able to reach during their time in the UK. Tutors are often able to feed into the discussion their own informal assessment of students' writing, and as the interview proceeds they may be able to give some informal assessment of students' oral ability too.

Pre-Sessional Students

In a previous study (Blue 1988) students' self-assessment ratings at the end of a pre-sessional course were compared with tutors' assessment of the students. The students were unaware of the grades given by the tutors at the time when they completed the self-assessment questionnaires. It was found that, although

there was a generally positive association, it was far from being a perfect match. It was also suggested that some nationalities may be more inclined to underestimate or overestimate their level than others.

On this occasion it was decided to compare students' self-ratings at the beginning of the pre-sessional course with the scores they had achieved in internationally recognised language tests (IELTS and TOEFL). Students would be aware of their scores in these tests, and it might be that these would influence their appreciation of their own level. A large number of the students would be attending the pre-sessional course because their score in one of these tests was not quite high enough to enable them to register unconditionally in the University. Their language level was therefore at quite a high level, though still needing one or two months' further study before reaching the level of linguistic sophistication and accuracy needed for university study.

IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) is widely used for admission to British and Australian universities. It aims to replicate the study environment as far as possible. Students choose from three test modules: physical sciences, life sciences and arts and social sciences, and they are given scores for reading, writing, listening and speaking. Although by no means perfect it has been found to be quite a good predictor of academic success (see Criper and Davies 1988; Blue 1993). Table 1 shows how self-assessment scores compare with IELTS scores.

In the self-assessment questionnaires students rate their level between 0 and 5 in each of the four language skills. Their total scores can therefore vary between 0 and 20, although in practice students on an advanced course would be expected to have scores above 8. For students who had taken IELTS the self-assessment scores range from 10 to 15.5. This is quite a normal range, but the distribution is not what would normally be expected. Students scoring 5.5, 6.0 and 6.5 in IELTS rate their own levels between 10.5 and 14.5, which is more or less the range that would be expected. However, there is a tendency for students with higher IELTS scores to underestimate their level and a very marked tendency for students with lower IELTS scores to overestimate their level, assuming of course that the IELTS scores do measure linguistic ability with any degree of accuracy. The student with the highest self-assessment score in this group (15.5) only scored 4.5 in IELTS, which is an enormous mismatch.

IELTS Band	Self-Assessment Score	Mean Self-Assessment
7.0 (1 student)	13	13
6.5 (4 students)	14.5 13, 13 11.5	13
6.0 (11 students)	14, 14 13.5, 13.5 13, 13, 13 12.5 12, 12, 12	13
5.5 (2 students)	11.5 10.5	11
5.0 (2 students)	13 10	11.5
4.5 (3 students)	15.5 14 12.5	14
Mean IELTS score 5.8	(23 students)	12.8

Table 1: Comparison of self-assessment with IELTS scores

When we look at the correlation coefficient, it turns out to be only 0.02, which basically means that there is no correlation between IELTS scores and self-assessment ratings. Any variation away from the mid-point in the self-assessment can statistically best be explained as a purely random variation. There are a number of measures of association which can more appropriately be used to compare ordinal data. Using the Goodman Kruskal gamma (for further details see Blue 1988) we find that the measure of association is just below 0.1, which means that there is a very slight positive association. Quade's formula shows that this is not significant. In other words, there is a strong probability that these results could have been produced by chance alone.

We come now to look at TOEFL scores and to see how they compare with self-assessment ratings. TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) is used all over the world, but particularly in North American universities. It is a multiple-choice test which gives separate scores for listening comprehension, structure and written expression, and vocabulary and reading comprehension. It is less clearly related to the academic environment than IELTS, but is nevertheless used with some measure of confidence by institutions wishing to make decisions about admittance to degree programmes. Although it appears to have less face validity than IELTS it does seem to serve as a fairly reliable measure of linguistic ability and a reasonably good predictor of success in the academic environment. Table 2 compares self-assessment with TOEFL scores.

TOEFL scores range from 477 to 623, and there is a greater range of self-assessment scores this time, from 9 to 16. Students who have taken TOEFL seem to be slightly more influenced by their test score when they come to assess their own level. However, the correlation coefficient is only 0.25, with a significance level of 0.18. In other words, there is a positive correlation, though not a very strong one, and there is an 18% probability that the results could have been produced by chance alone. Using the Goodman-Kruskal measure of association we find that there is a positive association of 0.18, which again is not very strong. Quade's formula shows that the significance level is below that required to reject the hypothesis that the result could be due to chance alone. If we look at the four students who gave themselves the highest score (16), we see that whilst two had achieved quite high TOEFL scores (583), the other two had only achieved 530 and 520. On the other hand, the student with the lowest self-assessment score (9) had achieved quite a healthy TOEFL score (560).

We see therefore that many students are not unduly influenced by their scores in internationally recognised language tests when they come to assess their own language level. If the test scores are an accurate reflection of linguistic ability (and there is a body of evidence to suggest that this is likely to be the case), then it would seem that students' self-ratings of their language ability at the beginning of a pre-sessional course cannot be relied upon. Some possible reasons for this are discussed below.

TOEFL Score	Self-Assessment Score	Mean Self-Assessment
623	15	
597	14.5	
593	13	
583	16,16	16
580	13	
570	12, 11	11.5
563	13.5	
560	13, 9	11
547	13	
543	12.5	
540	15, 12.5, 11.5, 11.5, 11.5	12.4
530	16, 12	14
527	15	
523	12, 11	11.5
520	16	
507	13.5, 12.5	13
503	12.5	
487	13	
477	11	
Mean TOEFL score 545	(29 students)	13

Table 2: Comparison of self-assessment with TOEFL scores

Post-course evaluation

Some six months after the end of the pre-sessional course the same students were asked to complete a second course evaluation questionnaire, and at the same time they were asked to re-assess their language proficiency. This meant that students had to be asked their names, and that any criticisms they wanted to make of the course could not be anonymous. This may have reduced the

response rate, as only nine students returned the questionnaire by the due date. These students were aware not only of any scores they may have achieved in internationally recognised English language tests but also of the grades they were awarded and of the detailed comments made by their tutors in their final reports at the end of the pre-sessional course. They were asked to assess their level in the following ten skill areas on a five-point scale:

- Reading academic texts with adequate understanding
- Reading with adequate speed
- Making notes from reading
- Writing academic texts which are clearly structured and do not contain too many errors
- Writing at reasonable speed (e.g. under exam pressure)
- Understanding lectures in own subject area
- Making notes from lectures
- Taking part in group discussions or seminars
- Communicating effectively with lecturers on a one-to-one basis
- Communicating effectively with other students.

Table 3 gives the tutors' rank ordering of the nine respondents and also shows how they ranked their own ability five or six months after the end of the pre-sessional course. The final column is arrived at by awarding a score of 5 for each time students have ticked the "native speaker level" box, 4 for each tick in the "very good" box, and so on down to 1 for "beginner level".

One would expect all students to have made progress in the time since they finished the pre-sessional course, and of course some students may have made more progress than others, so that the rank order established then may no longer have been an exact representation of their relative levels by the time of this post-course evaluation. However, one would not expect too many dramatic changes in the overall rank ordering, especially since there were very considerable differences of proficiency level at the end of the pre-sessional course.

The student with the most ticks in the "native speaker level" box was ranked third in the group by the tutors, but was clearly an experienced user of English as a second language. The only other two students to assess their ability at native speaker level in any skill were rated as being in the bottom third of the

Tutors' Rank Ordering and Country of Origin	Native Speaker Level (5)	Very Good (4)	Adequate (3)	Not Very Good (2)	Beginner Level (1)	Total Score
1 Germany		1	8	1		30
2 Lebanon		6	4			36
3 Tanzania	7	3				47
4 Italy		3	5	2		31
5 Italy		1	3	5	1	24
6 Saudi Arabia		5	4	1		34
7 Syria	5	5				45
8 Italy	4	4	2			42
9 Bangladesh		8	2			38

Table 3: Tutors' ranking of students compared with post-course self-assessment

group and certainly in the bottom half of the course as a whole. These two, together with the student rated least proficient by the tutors, actually awarded themselves three out of the four top scores in the self-assessment.

At the other end of the scale, the lowest self-assessment rating is given by the student whom the tutors would have placed in the middle of the group, whilst the student placed at the top of the group by the tutors (and in the top 10% of the course as a whole) achieved the second lowest self-assessment score. Overall, then, it seems that there is not a very good match at all between teachers' assessment of students' ability at the end of the pre-sessional course and their own self-assessment scores two terms later. As we believe accurate self-assessment to be an important factor in the continued language learning (including needs analysis and setting of goals) of such learners, this finding, combined with the results reported earlier, gives cause for some concern.

In-sessional students

Table 4 shows the self-assessment scores of 120 students who registered for in-sessional language courses and of a sub-set of 20 students who were still attending three particular courses on a regular basis by the end of the Spring

Self-assessment score	120 students registered for EAP classes	20 students regularly attending 3 EAP classes
18	2	—
	—	—
17	—	—
	3	—
16	2	—
	4	—
15	10	—
	6	—
14	11	1
	13	3
13	9	2
	7	—
12	11	2
	3	2
11	9	1
	4	2
10	8	2
	1	—
9	5	1
	4	3
8	2	1
	1	—
7	3	—
	1	—
6	1	—
Mean score	12.4	11.1

Table 4: Self-assessment scores of in-sessional students

Term, some five to six months later. These were courses for which I had easy access to the registers. Some other students in the group would have been attending other classes for which I had no attendance records, but the majority would have stopped attending language classes altogether by this time.

One of the particular problems faced by University students trying to continue with their language learning while pursuing their studies in another field is that of prioritising all their different activities. Although improved language will benefit them greatly in the long run, the short-term benefits are not very apparent, particularly as at the more advanced stages of language learning it is difficult to perceive progress. Consequently, although there is a great enthusiasm for language learning, both self-instruction and attending classes, at the beginning of each academic year, both of these modes experience a high drop-out rate as far as EAP students are concerned.

An interesting question therefore is whether those students who maintain their motivation and continue with language learning assess their language level differently from those who do not continue. Two points seem to stand out. Firstly, the self-assessment scores of the group who were still attending these particular classes regularly cover a much narrower range than the scores of all students registering for EAP - only about half the range, in fact, with no very high or very low scores. Secondly, the mean score of these students is substantially lower than that of all students registering for EAP. These findings are based on a very small number of respondents, but they are supported by intuition and by several years' experience of dealing with both successful and less successful language learners. For this reason the following two hypotheses are offered with some measure of confidence.

Hypothesis 1: Learners with low self-ratings tend to persevere with language learning, provided their self-ratings are not too low. It may be the case that students who assess their language level as being on the low side are more likely to see the need to carry on working at their English. Indeed, those who scored above 14, if their assessment was accurate, would probably have been able to cope quite adequtely with the linguistic demands of their studies. What is perhaps more surprising though is that a number of students who assessed their level as very low may also have given up, possibly through discouragement or perhaps because they were struggling so much with their main course of study that they simply could not find the time for continued formal language learning.

Hypothesis 2: Learners with realistic self-ratings tend to set and achieve realistic language learning goals. The students who were still attending these particular classes and therefore still working to achieve their goals had all rated their level as between 8 and 14, which is, after all, a very realistic range. Although we cannot be categorical about this, it would seem likely that those who rated their level as either very good or very bad (whether they were being totally realistic or not) had abandoned any language learning goals they may have had. So it is not enough to sit back and simply complain about how bad some students are at assessing their language level accurately. If accurate self-assessment is an important factor in setting and reaching language learning goals, then a crucial function of the language teacher, helper or consultant is to guide learners towards more accurate self-assessment. The final section of this paper will discuss some of the ways in which this can be done. First, though, we turn to look at some possible reasons for inaccurate self-assessment.

Discussion and suggestions for sensitising students

It will be seen from the different experiences described above that self-assessment is an area that many non-native speaker students have difficulty with, even when they have had feedback on their language level in the form either of grades and comments given by their tutors at the end of a course or of internationally recognised test scores. There are a number of possible reasons for this. A previous study (Blue 1988) has shown that nationality can be an important factor in self-assessment, with some nationalities having a tendency to overestimate their level and others tending towards underestimation. Another factor, which could be related, is who learners compare themselves with. For example, if they have had access to native speakers they will tend to compare themselves with a native speaker model, whereas those whose contact with the language has been through second or foreign language speakers may have a higher view of their own proficiency. Then there is the problem of comparing themselves with other students. This is a double problem since, on the one hand, those who have been selected for study in the UK will often be those who have always been thought of by their teachers (and therefore by themselves) as being good at English (maybe even the cream of the cream) and, on the other hand, there is the problem of oral performance dominating in comparisons with other students, and students who are reasonably confident in class may not realise that their written work is relatively weak.

One possible reason why self-assessment of the type described here may not always be accurate is the fact that students often want to impress their tutors. These self-assessment questionnaires are after all semi-public documents, and the teacher may well believe the student's self-assessment. It would not do for teachers to form a lower impression than necessary, especially since important decisions may be based on this initial impression. However much reassuring may be done, some learners may remain unsure of the real purpose of the self-assessment exercise and the use that will be made of the questionnaires. Then, of course, there is the question of inexperience. Although self-assessment is now quite common in British schools, it will be a new concept to many international students and they may simply need more practice before they learn how to evaluate their level of language proficiency more accurately. It has been suggested that accuracy in self-assessment is related to proficiency, and that students get better at assessing their level as they become more proficient in the language. There is no doubt that they become more demanding of themselves, but my own experience suggests that whereas less proficient language users tend to overestimate their ability, advanced learners tend to underestimate their proficiency level compared with both test scores and tutor evaluations. There is a tendency, therefore, to err in the other direction rather than necessarily to become more accurate.

As we have seen, there is some evidence to suggest that those students who do assess their language level realistically may persevere with language learning to a greater extent than those whose self-assessment is unrealistically high or low. Moreover, an awareness of present language level is an important factor in needs analysis and in setting goals for future language learning. Consequently, we have tried to put in place a variety of mechanisms to help learners to assess their language level more accurately.

The self-assessment questionnaire in use at the University of Southampton is always backed up with an individual interview, whether it be at the beginning of a pre-sessional course or as part of the registration procedure for in-sessional classes. During the interview it is normal to check with students on how they feel about their ability in the different language and study skills, and a certain amount of probing may lead them to question whether they rated their abilities accurately in the self-assessment questionnaires.

Another important means of sensitising students is the feedback that they are given by their teachers. Students who constantly receive positive comments

on their performance will tend to develop a positive view of their language level and to assess themselves accordingly. Those whose written work is constantly covered in red ink and whose oral contributions receive rather less encouragement will generally tend to be more critical of themselves when they come to assess their own language proficiency, possibly failing to recognise what they are capable of. The current trend that we find in some quarters to give only positive feedback (stating what learners are capable of but not mentioning their deficiencies) may help to promote a positive self-image, but it may not always be as helpful to learners as it is intended to be. Students who are constantly told that their work is "good" (and this is a word that must pass teachers' lips very frequently) may have difficulty with being self-critical. As teachers, helpers or facilitators we have to find a way of encouraging learners, helping them to derive satisfaction from their achievements, whilst at the same time holding before them goals for the future and helping them to realise, where necessary, that they still have a long way to go.

We have already discussed self-assessment using descriptive rating scales. However, if learners are to become more proficient in self-assessment they need plenty of practice, and it may be appropriate to use other forms of self-assessment from time to time. If this is done in the target language it can be a useful language learning exercise too. Both Oskarsson (1978) and LeBlanc (1985) have suggested a series of statements about what learners can do in a foreign language, and these can easily be adapted to different learners at different levels and with different needs. Unlike the global statements of ability found in the descriptive rating scales these relate to a large number of very specific tasks that learners can perform in the target language. Learners can either simply tick the statements that they feel are true or they can be asked to give themselves a rating, e.g. always (5), normally (4), quite often (3), sometimes (2), never (1). Examples of the sorts of statements that can be used in an EAP context are:

> When listening to a lecture I can recognise the staging of different points.
>
> I can understand how examples (or jokes) relate to the main points the lecturer is making.
>
> I can understand instructions from my lecturers without asking for repetition or clarification.
>
> If a fellow student has missed a lecture, I can summarise the contents for them, referring to my notes to supply some of the details.

As well as assessing their current level of language proficiency learners have a lot to gain from developing a self-critical attitude towards their performance, and this monitoring of performance will in the long run feed into their self-assessment. An interesting approach to helping learners develop such an attitude with regard to their writing can be found in the "evaluation checklists" developed by White and McGovern (1994). These give a very helpful set of questions to ask either about one's own writing or that of one's peers, for autonomous learners can also support one another. The questions cover the main idea, writer's purpose, content, organisation, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, mechanical accuracy, and response as readers.

Closely related to the monitoring of performance is the monitoring of progress. It is important for learners to take stock from time to time, to evaluate their learning processes and to assess where they have got to in relation to their learning goals. This may help in reviewing the needs analysis and setting new objectives. Learners using the language resources centre at the University of Southampton are advised to complete a resource-based language learning questionnaire at regular intervals to help them in this process.

Finally, students need constant reminders and methodological guidance if they are to assess their level, monitor their learning and analyse their needs effectively. One of the study guides available for students to pick up in the language resources centre at the University of Southampton is entitled *Ten Steps towards Making your Language Learning More Effective* (Wright 1992). Some of these suggestions have been adapted from Ellis and Sinclair (1989) and Dickinson (1992). In summary, the ten steps are:

1 Analyse your language learning needs
2 Assess your present level
3 Prioritise your needs
4 Work out a plan of study
5 Be realistic in your objectives
6 Keep a record of what you do
7 Monitor the way you learn
8 Take every opportunity to use the language
9 Don't worry about making mistakes
10 Assess your progress regularly.

It can be seen that steps 1, 3, 4 and 5 are to do with needs analysis and setting goals for learning, while steps 2, 6, 7 and 10 are all about self-assessment and monitoring of progress. The reason why these aspects are stressed so much is that we consider them to be so important, especially for autonomous learning. Indeed, informal observation of students making use of the language resources centre suggests that those learners who persist with this kind of self-directed learning and make substantial progress are those who systematically assess their language proficiency, developing their accuracy over time, who analyse their needs and set realistic language learning goals, which they review periodically, and who monitor their own progress. Even if self-assessment is not easy for the majority of language learners, it is essential that they learn how to assess their level with some degree of realism if they are to set and attain realistic language learning goals. It is only as they are able to do this that they will be able to sustain the motivation that is so necessary for the long haul that can be involved in reaching the higher levels of proficiency in a foreign language.

References

BACHMAN L F and A S PALMER (1989) "The construct validation of self-ratings of communicative language ability". *Language Testing* 6.1: 14-29

BLUE G M (1988) "Self-assessment: the limits of learner independence". In Brookes A and P Grundy (eds) *Individualization and Autonomy in Language Learning*. Oxford and London: Modern English Publications in association with The British Council

BLUE G M (1993) "Nothing succeeds like linguistic competence: the role of language in academic success". In Blue G M (ed)

BLUE G M (ed) (1993) *Language, Learning and Success: Studying through English*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan

CRIPER C and A DAVIES *ELTS Validation Project Report, Research Report 1 (i)*. Cambridge: The British Council and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

DICKINSON L (1987) *Self-instruction in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

DICKINSON L (1992) *Learner Autonomy 2: Learner Training for Language Learning*. Dublin: Authentik

ELLIS G and B SINCLAIR (1989) *Learning to Learn English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

LEBLANC R (1985) "Second language student placement through self-assessment". *Carleton Papers in Applied Language Studies*. New York

OSKARSSON M (1978) *Approaches to Self-assessment in Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon (published for and on behalf of the Council of Europe)

OSKARSSON M (1989) "Self-assessment of language proficiency: rationale and applications". *Language Testing* 6.1: 1-13

WANGSOTORN Achara (1981) "Self-assessment in English skills by undergraduate and graduate students in Thai universities". In Read J A (ed) *Directions in Language Testing*. Singapore: Singapore University Press

WARD GOODBODY M (1993) "Letting the students choose: a placement procedure for a pre-sessional course". In Blue G M (ed)

WHITE R and D McGOVERN (1994) *Writing*. London: Prentice Hall

WRIGHT V (1992) *Ten Steps towards Making your Language Learning More Effective*. University of Southampton, mimeo

BEST COPY AVAILABLE